

Alresford

Distance: 4 miles / 6.7 km; easy walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 3 Guildford to Dunbridge

Refreshments: There are many pubs and eating places in the vicinity.

Map: Explorer Map: OL 32 (Winchester, New Alresford & East Meon)

Getting there: Stagecoach South runs regular buses to Alresford from Winchester - 64, 67, C41
If driving, park at New Alresford Station Car Park (SO24 9JL)

The telegraph wires were whining as if for rain as I neared Alresford, having on my right hand the willowy course of the young Arle, and before me its sedgy waters, Old Alresford pond. The road became Alresford by being lined for a third of a mile downhill by cottages, inns and shops. This is the whole town, except for one short, very broad turning halfway along at its highest point, and opposite where the church stands bathed in cottages.



The Avenue, Edward Thomas

New Alresford, as distinct from Old Alresford to its north, owes much to the energetic Norman Bishops of Winchester Henry de Blois and Godfrey de Lucy. It became a thriving market town dealing in wool and leather. In 1644, during the Civil War, the defeated Royalists after the nearby battle of Cheriton set fire to the town. Indeed, several fires – 1689, 1710 and 1736 – slighted the medieval settlement, destroying the church and Market House. The town's 18th century rebuilding created many of Alresford's fine Georgian buildings. The Mid-Hants Railway opened at Alresford in 1865. It sent daily wagonloads of local watercress – sometimes known as 'poor man's bread' – to Covent Garden. The water quality of the chalk springs had encouraged the creation of the cress beds. Cress is rich in iron, vitamin C and calcium and its healthful properties have long been recognised. Today the local railway operates as the heritage Watercress Line. Alresford does not take its name from the river Alre, but vice versa. Cobbett, in his 1825 Rural Rides, says his love of this area began from *my first seeing them, when I was about ten, [and] always has been my delight. Large sweeping downs, and deep dells here and there, with villages amongst lofty trees, are my great delight.*

From living in Kent, the Thomas's were interested in and walked the Pilgrim's Way to Canterbury. It stretches westwards to Winchester and in 1912 Thomas wrote *From* [Farnham] *the main road to Alton is I think exactly the Pilgrim's Way, but after Alton you are in difficulty.*

Better refer to Belloc, but I think he is conjectural to Ropley. From there you go by the main road to Bishop's Sutton where you turn left, avoiding Alresford (which otherwise you ought to see, Pond and all) except its workhouse. Living at Steep, he frequently visited Alresford with family or friends, either for itself or as a staging post on walks and rides.



1. Walk down Station Rd

2. Go right at the junction with West Street to the Town Centre and first left down Broad St, taking in Edward Thomas's view to the north.



Broad St to the north

3. As the road curves right, walk towards The Globe and take the lane to the right of it and Pond View and go down the Soke into the pub gardens.

Toilets are available near the start point. A plaque on the wall identifies it as a Cold War 'dead drop' for the Portland Spy Group who passed on secret Admiralty military documents to the Soviet Union. It reads *Secret information hidden in this toilet was collected periodically by Harry Houghton. In 1961 he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for his part in the Portland Spy Ring.* Houghton and his partner Ethel Gee, both working as clerks at the Dorset base, were living beyond their means and were under surveillance by MI5 from 1959 until their trial. His estranged wife warned Counter Intelligence in 1956 but her claims were dismissed as having *been made on the spur of the moment and out of pure spite.* Gee and Houghton married in 1971 after their release from custody.

Alresford is an excellent little town, sad-coloured but not cold, and very airy. For not only does the main street descend from this point steeply west towards Winchester, but the broad street also descends northwards, so that over the tops of the houses crossing the bottom of it and over the hidden Alre, are seen the airy highlands of Abbotstone, Swarraton and Godsfield.

4. Return to road, cross over to a private drive and go left along a walled path, over the Alre on the medieval bridge, down steps and right on to Mill Hill (the Mill is on the right).

5. Go down the tree-lined lane, later a path, with the river on the right. Pass the cottages (dated 1814) and watercress beds. This will lead to a road junction.

6. Here, turn left and follow the lane; it curves over a stream and up to a pebbled track on the right, before the flint and brick wall of Pinglestone Farm on the opposite side of the lane.

7. Turn right, go up the track

8. Switch to the grassy footpath and, continuing in the same direction, go through a kissing gate,

9. Pass the refurbished Manor Farm buildings up to a junction with the long, dormered building of Abbotstone Cottage ahead.

10. Turn left and take the drove road, marked by a finger post indicating a restricted byway.

11. Follow this sunken lane on its slightly upward trend. After a quarter of a mile, the lane is crossed by another trackway with a finger post under a beech tree. Turn left down the Oxdrove Way/Offroad cycle track.

12. Follow this tree-lined green lane for half a mile.

From here, the Pond and its sedgy reed beds may be seen.

Godfrey de Lucy, Bishop of Winchester, directed the building of a weir trapping the Alre and other rivers to create a vast pond covering some 200 acres. It was said to have stretched over a mile from Alresford to his palace at Bishop's Sutton. Its waters powered several mills and it was used for the transport of wool and merchandise.

The Soke was in the domain of the Bishops of Winchester; the medieval word means an area of jurisdiction for the administration of justice with a right to receive fees and fines.



Sluice on Alresford Pond, BM



Old Alresford Church

Note the extensive cress beds and reeds on the right.

Old Alresford Church and the cress beds are on the right, as is the Manor Farm House. Old Alresford was the original settlement. Its 18th century flint and brick St Mary's church originated in Saxon times, and the knoll on which it stands suggest it may have been a pre-Christian place of worship. It holds monuments to the Rodney family and to Mary Sumner, founder of the Mothers' Union. Nearby stands Old Alresford House belonging to the Rodneys, the most famous member

13. At the road, turn right and, on the bend, take the footpath on the left.

14. Walk up the slight rise

15. At the end of the vineyard, go through the gate and on to the road, cross and take the footpath down a broad green track. On the left side of The Lodge take the footpath marked Wayfarers' Walk and Watercress Way down to the River Arle.

16. Follow the track along a dog-leg passing over the river at the Eel House.



The Eel House

17. Follow the river on your left to the Fulling Mill, pass Arle House and up Ladywell Lane to Mill Hill.

18. Walk back up Mill Hill, then Broad St, and cross over West St to visit the parish church of St John the Baptist.



St John the Baptist

being the controversial and illustrious Admiral George Rodney (1718- 1792) who was buried in the churchyard.

With abundant field maple and ash trees, this is part of an old cross-country route called the Lunway, used for driving cattle on the Downs to the northeast of Winchester.

Fine views of Alresford and the dormered Arlebury Park lie ahead.

Arlebury House, built in 1774, is an Italianate mansion, now divided into flats, set in parklands and formal gardens.

The Eel House was built in the 1820s by the Harris family of Arlebury House. It spans the river with three arches and was devised to trap eels which travelled from Old Alresford Pond, via the Arle, Itchen, the Atlantic to the breeding grounds of the Sargasso Sea. The catch was sold to merchants from as far off as London



The Fulling Mill

The Fulling Mill, powered by the Alre, dates back to the 13th century though the present structure is 17th century and is built of timber, with painted brickwork and thatch. Fulling was a process to remove lanolin from the

wool, preparing it for thickening by being beaten by water-driven hammers

19. Track through the churchyard back to the starting point.

The towered flint church and the churchyard make almost as much of a town as Alresford itself, so numerous are the tombs of all the Wools, Keanes, Corderoys, Privetts, Comeses, Whitears, Norgetts, Dykeses, scattered among many small yews trees.

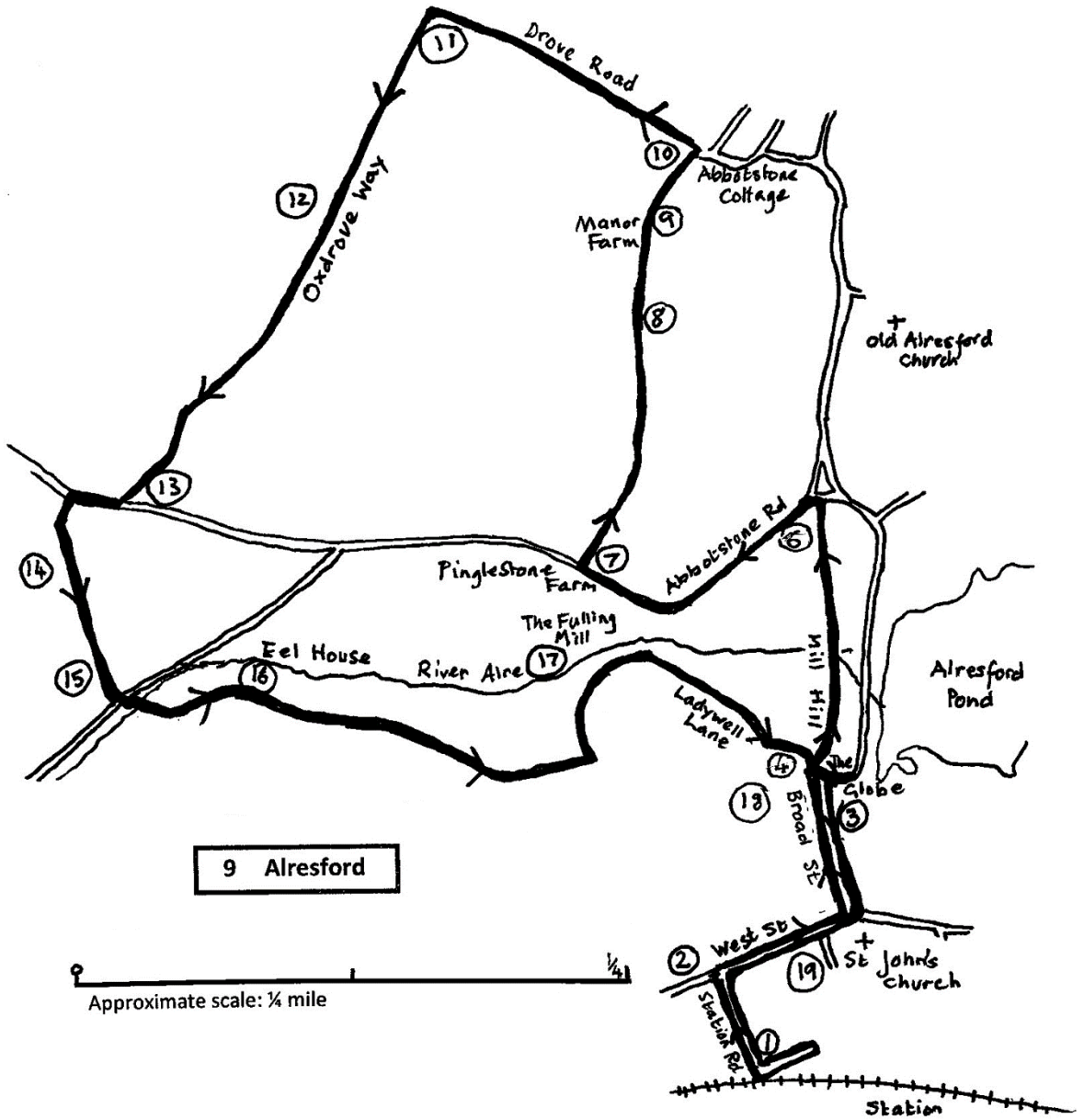
There was an older 13th century church which was part of the Old Alresford parish. It became a parish in its own right in 1851. It has a 14th century tower, with a 16th century crenelated brickwork parapet and the rest was rebuilt in a gothic perpendicular style by Arthur Blomfield (to whom the young Thomas Hardy was articled in 1862)

At one side stand many headstones of French officers who served Napoleon, but died in England about the time of Waterloo – Lhuille, Lavan, Gamier, Riouffe and Founier.

These officers were transferred from the hulks and allowed to live on parole, scratching a living, often penurious, in scattered towns and villages,

With thanks to Catherine Carberry and to Nick Denton of the Edward Thomas Fellowship

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Approximate scale: 1/4 mile